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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 009210

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: SUBDUED JORDANIAN REACTION TO ARAFAT'S DEATH

REF: AMMAN 09095

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY

1. (U) The drawn-out nature of Yasser Arafat's demise, as well as the long Eid al-Fitr holiday weekend, ensured that there was a subdued response in Jordan to the Palestinian leader's death. Jordan's official reaction was correct: the PM declared a three-day mourning period nationwide and King Abdullah attended Arafat's funeral in Cairo. Public gatherings to honor Arafat, mainly in Palestinian refugee camps, were small and peaceful. A public demand by Arafat's Jordanian doctor for an autopsy cemented for many Jordanians a belief that Arafat was poisoned. End Summary.

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GOJ OFFERS CONDOLENCES

2. (C) Upon receiving the official word of Arafat's death early on November 11, the GOJ set in motion its obviously well-thought out reaction: three days of mourning for the country (closing schools and government offices) and forty days for the Royal Court (otherwise a hardly mournful place, as the King in fact kept a busy public schedule, including avoidable ceremonial events). The King joined other heads of state at Arafat's Cairo funeral, and all Jordanian flags were lowered to half-mast (although unlike the marking of the death of the UAE's Sheikh Zayed, the enormous flag flying above the Royal Palace compound -- visible from most of Amman -- was at half mast for only a day, a truer indication of Hashemite sentiment toward the man who tried to take Jordan from them just over thirty years ago). The King designated Foreign Minister al-Mulki to represent Jordan at Arafat's burial in Ramallah; Amman MP, and gadfly, Mamdouh Abbadi headed a Lower House delegation to Ramallah as well.

3. (U) The GOJ issued numerous public statements of sympathy. King Abdullah sent a condolence cable to interim Palestinian President Rawhi Fattouh, and offered a special prayer for Arafat after he and the Queen shared iftar with a group of orphans on November 11. The Royal Court issued a statement expressing Jordan's sympathy to the Palestinian people, describing Arafat as "a man who dedicated his life in defending the rights of the Palestinian people to establish their own state." The King told press that Jordan would continue to support the cause by supporting "fresh peace efforts," emphasizing that Jordan will always support the Palestinians in restoring their legitimate rights. "We are sure that the Palestinian brothers, who realize the current challenges, will maintain their unity to serve their cause and overcome such an ordeal," he added. Meanwhile, Deputy PM Muasher pledged Jordan's full support to the Palestinians to ensure a "smooth transition" and help revive the peace process. Muasher made the remarks at Marka Airport in Amman as he saw Abu Mazen and Fattouh off for Cairo.

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SUBDUED PUBLIC REACTION

4. (U) The protracted drama surrounding Arafat's demise appeared to take the steam out of any motivation for public gatherings in Jordan after his death. Unlike large (and sometimes violent) demonstrations after Sheikh Yassin's assassination, Jordanian security sources reported only a few small, peaceful gatherings in refugee camps after Friday prayers on November 12. Camp representatives received condolences for three days, as did the Palestinian mission in Amman. Approximately 100 university students gathered at the Palestinian mission briefly to express their sympathy on November 12. Participants in a small sit-in on November 11 at the Professional Associations complex, ostensibly to express solidarity with the Iraqi resistance and opposition to the Fallujah operation, carried portraits of Arafat.

5. (U) Press coverage of Arafat's death was heavy, and many are expected to have tuned in to satellite television stations for live broadcasts of Arafat's funeral and burial on November 12 (notably, Jordan TV did not carry the funeral live, despite the King's attendance). Other Jordanians skipped watching the event, preoccupied with preparations for

Eid al-Fitr, which began officially in Jordan on November 14.

In several "man on the street" interviews, Jordanians expressed their sadness at Arafat's passing, but quite a few also commented it was just another day for them, and that Arafat's death made no difference in their personal lives.

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CALLS FOR PALESTINIAN UNITY  
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16. (U) Members of Parliament issued statements of respect for Arafat and called on the Palestinian factions to come together for the sake of national unity. Amman MP Mamdouh Abbadi said: "No one can take President Arafat's place but if the Palestinian factions come together, they may fill the gap left by his death." MP Bassam Haddadin from Zarqa predicted that the Palestinians would now take a "more institutionalized approach in leadership," although this would take time. Worried that Arafat's death would exacerbate a rift between the PLO and HAMAS, Abbadi said he feared that an Islamist leadership "would mean an extreme leadership that may lead the Palestinian people down a different path." Islamic Action Front Deputy Hayat Massimi disagreed: "HAMAS's main concern is not attaining leadership but liberation," she said.

17. (U) Former PM Abdul Salam Majali, who signed the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty with Rabin in 1994, told local press that he hoped that the Palestinians would "look to the future as they learn lessons from the past." He added: "Israel has no excuse now to keep saying we do not have a partner to establish peace with. However, I hope Israel will not create a new enemy to hinder future peace efforts."

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LOOKING FOR MORE FROM THE U.S.  
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18. (U) An editorial in the English-language Jordan Times daily criticized President Bush's remark that he hoped to see a Palestinian state by the end of his new term. "When Bush says that he envisions...a Palestinian state in four years, he not only negates the roadmap's critical timetable, which set 2005 as the time frame for that most important goal, but he again delays the process of peace-making. By doing so, he sentences the Palestinians to four more years of Israeli occupation and four more years in which Israel can continue its policy of establishing "facts on the ground," thereby making withdrawal from Palestinian territories a non-starter."

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RUMORS OF ARAFAT'S POISONING PERSIST  
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19. (C) Persistent rumors that Arafat was poisoned intensified in Jordan after Arafat's personal doctor, the highly-respected Jordanian physician Ashraf al-Kurdi, publicly called for an autopsy and full investigation into the cause of his death. Unsurprisingly, Israel is the main suspect, but several Palestinian-Jordanians shared their suspicion with emboffs about the culpability of certain senior PA officials in the "plot." In their minds, in this area of conspiracy-driven thinking, the fact that the officials (including Nabil Sha'ath) strongly dismissed the possibility of poisoning only further implicated them.

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COMMENT  
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10. (C) The timing of Arafat's death -- just before the holidays ending Ramadan -- and the extensive coverage of his deteriorating health tempered any potential negative reactions in Jordan. The public expressions of sympathy belie almost certain relief among some Jordanians (particularly among East Bankers, including Jordanian officialdom) that Arafat has finally gone, creating an opening for new leaders and an opportunity for progress toward a two-state solution. Some old-timers are doubtless glad, having never forgiven Arafat for his role in Jordan's 1970 war. However, Jordanians will remain skeptical of the new leaders' ability to change much on the ground and are hoping for strong, tangible support from Israel and the United States in order to bolster moderate Palestinian leaders' ability to deliver on the needs of their constituents.

11. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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HALE